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JOHN CALVIN ON SOCIAL CHALLENGES

ABSTRACT

John Calvin's interpretation of Holy Scripture as the infallible Word of God dominated his approach to socio-economic, sociopolitical and human relation issues. This article endeavours to indicate that his 16th-century views have not lost their relevance for the current paradigm on social challenges. To him, theology was no mere theoretical or academic field; it always tended to become a way of living within the sphere of God's providence. He thus emphasised the stewardship of man in God's creation. Whatever affliction people experienced, be it caused by natural disasters or by human disrespect for society, Calvin felt it as profound grief, so that he urged the community to get involved where aid was required. His written legacy abounds in guidelines for dealing with various kinds of social and economic issues. His clear view and perspectives on the social challenges of his era provide more than enough to consider in the 21st century.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social challenges have never been absent in human communities. The Renaissance period was no exception. The daily life of the vast majority of citizens, be it in rural areas or in villages, lacked the basic needs in healthcare, proper nutrition, legal assistance, education, employment, and general welfare. Genuine guidance and true assistance by people of social standing and religious leaders could certainly improve the daily life of many people. During his sojourn in Geneva, Calvin wrote and acted



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on provoking issues of social justice in circumstances that differed to a huge extent from those of the 21st century. Yet, much of his thoughts are undoubtedly relevant for the current socio-economic and sociopolitical issues as well as for the broad spectrum of all-embracing human relations. The crucial and determining question as to lasting relevance is the premise of his conclusions as guidelines for social life and human behaviour.

With the theological foundation of the dignity of man and a belief in both social and individual responsibility to live a good, productive, and moral life before God, Calvin worked towards an effective civil government. He led initiatives for free education, relief for the poor, construction of hospitals, prison reform, improved sanitation systems, consumer protection laws, and provision for refugees. His consistent premise was Holy Scripture as the infallible Word of God. Holy Scripture, however, was in need of exposition and contemporary implementation. He did just that in his extensive commentaries on the Bible and, more particularly, in his sermons, his extensive correspondence, and in various pronouncements and documents that were to be published in due course. His leadership in Geneva was crucial and even decisive for many contemporary social issues. His influence extended much further to European communities of that era and even worldwide in centuries to come. Calvin's thoughts on social issues may even be valuable to a secular society, as McKee (2007:4-5) points out:

... much social and economic truth can be and is known without saving faith [so that] it is possible to adapt what Calvin says on socio-economic matters to address a non-Christian audience.

As *Verbi Divini* Minister, he regarded it as his obligation not only to educate and instruct his own congregation and the church in general, but also to give sound guidance to society for the glory of God. Thus, his conviction that the people of God may not despise those "whom God has placed in so illustrious a station" (Comm. 2 Cor. 4:5). God employs men to be his ambassadors in the world, to be interpreters of His secret will, and to personally represent Christ (*qui personam denique suam repraesentent*) (Inst. IV.3.1). His implementation of biblical truths for society always used to be appropriate and clear. He never hesitated to denounce corruption and every kind of malpractice in society, and to call perpetrators to repentance, humbling them before God. Whatever the views of the majority used to be, the pastor should under no circumstances ever think lightly of his ministry. He is the interpreter of Holy Scripture among the people of God (Potgieter 2001). At the same time, the servant of God should be diligent in the pastoral care of the people of God, visit the sick and needy, and admonish those living in sin (CR XXXVIII:45. *Projet d'un ordre*

de visitation des églises de la campagne 11 Janvier 1546). He should be honest, reliable, not flippant, and always set a good example. In fact, he should be endowed with all the virtues and qualifications that the apostle mentions in the First Epistle to Timothy, chapter 3:1-7, and in Titus 1:7-9.

His application of biblical truths was topical and to the point. In ethical issues, he fearlessly condemned the vices of society and of individual conduct, calling people to obedience so that they may glorify God in every respect of their being. He never shrunk away from exposing heresy and false doctrine and from calling those who erred to repentance.

For Calvin, it was essential that his hearers should understand what he was preaching. He took diligent care that his sermons were clear and straightforward. Because Calvin himself had a clear grasp of the truths that he wished to convey to the people, he could deliver it in an uncomplicated way. On his deathbed, he mentioned that he could have been known as ingenious, had he been more intellectual in his orations, but he deliberately rejected that in favour of simple speech (Mühlhaupt 1934:7).

Education of the young had a special place in his heart.

The first compulsory primary schooling in Europe was begun in Geneva under Calvin's guidance as part of an urgent social agenda designed to improve both the moral and material situation of the people, and thus, it is highly probable that training would consume a great deal of his energy and attention (Biéler 2005:134).

At present, the crisis of research in the *humaniora* is that too much is often being done about the "what" of a particular field. Much more satisfying is a method focusing rather on the reasoning or the "why" beyond the "what". This will clearly result in a better conceptual analysis and promote an understanding of the context in which something was said or written, addressing the *Sitz im Leben* of motives or views.

Witte (2010:34) correctly points out that Calvin's scope was more than that of the theologian. For all his fame as theologian and biblical commentator, Witte argues that he was first and foremost a jurist. His juristic background is obvious in his drafting of major new ordinances on marriage, social welfare, public morality, education, and other topics.

2. PROVIDENCE

A most remarkable feature of Calvin's theological thought is that it was ever so often concretised in his more popular writings. For him, theology was no mere theoretical or academic field; it always tended to become

a way of living. This is particularly true of the doctrine of providence, as Saxer (1980:22) rightly points out:

Dabei ist charakteristisch, dass nicht mehr die Vorsehungslehre als ein dogmatischer Paragraph betrachtet und dessen Einordnung in ein Gedankensystem Calvins versucht wird. Es wird dabei vielmehr sichtbar, wie der Vorsehungsglaube als eine Art Lebenselement das ganze Denken Calvins durchsieht und eine genaue Entsprechung zu dem schon immer festgestellten Grundmotiv der Ehre Gottes als letztem Ziel allen Geschehens bildet.

Whatever men or Satan himself devise, God holds the helm, and makes their efforts contribute to the execution of his judgments (*Inst.* 1.18.1).

In various letters – particularly those written in consolation of people experiencing hardship – he sought to explain (and perhaps even to justify) circumstances according to this doctrine. Whatever happens, in some way it has a particular place in the eternal counsel of God – and this includes any kind of social challenge that we may encounter. We must, however, know that the providence of God is hidden from us; it may often happen that we may not be able to grasp why so many issues of social relations are beyond our understanding, and that we find ourselves at our wit's end, as we are unable to rectify what is wrong and evil.

Providence is God's very active *gubernatio* of everything on earth. He is not only Creator, but also Provider and Guide. Calvin based this dogma on God's will.

It amounts to this: When it is said that God's will is the very cause of all things, his providence is upheld as guide of all man's considerations and works; thus it not only exerts power in the elect, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, but it also compels to submissiveness those rejected.¹

Clearly, in the view of Calvin, the church has an important role in communicating the providence of God (Saxer 1980:36; Nielsen 1980:73). Although the providence of God extends over all mankind, it has a very particular place in the lives of the faithful belonging to the church of the Lord. The strong emphasis on the role of the church in communicating providence should be considered in view of Calvin's particular ecclesiastical

1 "Summa haec sit: quum Dei voluntas dicitur rerum omnium esse causa, providentiam eius statui moderatricem in cunctis hominum consiliis et operibus, ut non tantum vim suam exserat in electis, qui spiritu sancto reguntur, sed etiam reprobos in obsequium cogat" (CO II col. 170).

approach developed during his stay in Strasbourg in 1543. On this topic, Nielsen (1980:73) writes:

Although God manifests Himself to the whole human race as Father and Judge, yet because the *church* is the sanctuary in which He dwells, He reveals His presence there still more plainly; there He exercises His fatherhood, and deems the church worthy, as it were, to draw more closely to His side. *The church is the real sphere in which God carries out His providential purposes and the special theatre in which His providence operates.*

In no way did Calvin minimise human responsibility in his views on divine providence. In fact, throughout his theology, he emphasised the stewardship of man in God's creation. It remained his firm conviction in faith that God in his Providence knew better what is to our good and would guide us far better than had we been left to find our own way.

This knowledge calls us not only to gratitude, but also to live in obedience to God. To Richebourg, Calvin wrote that we should express a spirit of gratitude when God justly and fairly deals with us. Our gratitude should, however, not only lead to our own obedience, but we should also proclaim it to others. Calvin would not hesitate to tell someone what the Lord had done, so that he might thus learn to be obedient to God's providence and teach others to do the same.

3. PRAYER

This should, however, not lead to a deterministic view of providence with the implication that prayers for resolving serious problems would be redundant or even futile (*Inst.* 1.17.2). Calvin very clearly stated that, even when prayers of this kind are not answered as we would have liked, we should not doubt the love and care of our heavenly Father.

It may be hard to understand why our prayers for an end to social injustice so often do not lead to a change for the better. Calvin touches on this in his exposition of Isaiah 65:24.

Although we are surrounded by innumerable distresses and calamities, yet we cannot be miserable so long as we are at liberty to betake ourselves to the Lord. Here therefore the Lord promises that we shall not pray in vain though it becomes fully evident that we have been heard when the event actually proves it, yet God does not in the meantime overlook us; for he does not permit us to faint, but supports us by the power of his Spirit, that we may wait for him patiently (CO 37:432).

God does not delay because He has need of time (as men do), but because He is exercising and testing our patience. We may also bear in mind that God may listen to us in two ways:

first, when He renders assistance openly; and secondly, when He aids us by the power of his Spirit, that we may not sink under the weight of afflictions (CO 37:432).

God listens, hears and answers by his grace (Comm. Isa. 38:5; CO 32:651). We should indeed make use of all the resources and remedies available to us (*Inst.* 1.17.4; see 1.16.4 and 1.16.7). The resources that God employs could, in fact, be human prayers and behaviour (Potgieter 2006b). It should be no less than a sign of our dependence and evidence of our compassion for fellow human beings. Calvin approvingly quotes Augustine's view that God may answer our prayers in a way that is different from what we would expect (*Inst.* 3.20.15). This clarification may be useful in pastoral care. In his correspondence, he often refers to God's providence in a therapeutic sense (Potgieter 1982).

4. NATURAL DISASTERS

Every kind of affliction that people experienced caused Calvin deep-felt grief. Natural disasters and epidemic diseases brought about a huge responsibility on the community to get involved through whatever kind of aid was required. Severe natural disasters such as cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions often call for theological enlightenment. It is abundantly clear that Calvin regarded these disasters as taking place within God's providence. In his Commentary on Psalm 107, Calvin wrote:

The Psalmist teaches us, in the first place, that human affairs are not regulated by the fickle and uncertain wheel of fortune, but that we must observe the judgments of God in the different vicissitudes which occur in the world, and which men imagine happen by chance. Consequently, adversity and all the ills which mankind endure, as shipwrecks, famines, banishments, diseases, and disasters in war, are to be regarded as so many tokens of God's displeasure, by which he summons them, on account of their sins, before his judicial throne (Comm. Ps. 107 Introduction; CO 32:135).

Providence, however, is not to be regarded as primarily an issue of doctrine, so that even disasters should rather be viewed as fundamental to the glory of God, which is the ultimate goal of all that happens in daily life (Potgieter 2006a). He could thus state that the faithful should console

themselves in adversity (*in rebus adversis*) by the knowledge that they will experience no kind of affliction, unless God ordained and even ordered it (*nihil se perpeti nisi Dei ordinatione et mandato*), because they live under his hand (*Inst.* 1,16,3; OS III, 190). No famine, plague or whatever kind of affliction is a matter of chance, but it is destined, in obedience to God under his hand (*Dei mani dirigi*), to whatever end it pleases Him (Comm. Ps. 105:16; CO 32:104).

In his sermons on the book of Job, Calvin emphasised that we should confess that we are not yet able to recognise the righteousness of providence, but that we will ultimately see it in its real sense (Schreiner 1986:175). One can assume that Calvin would certainly regard all social abuses and misdemeanours in the same way. His view on co-responsibility in society is crucial in this regard. In his view, sympathy and aid are an inescapable charge to mankind:

In one word, not to dwell longer on this, give heed, and you will at once perceive (*facile perspicies*) that ignorance of Providence is the greatest of all miseries, and the knowledge of it the highest happiness (*Inst.* 1.17.11).

5. DOUBT

Undoubtedly, people suffering any kind of social injustice inflicted upon them may even have serious doubts about the care of God. For that very reason, Calvin viewed pastoral guidance in this regard as an essential responsibility of the church.

Concepts such as *doubt*, *care* and *uncertainty*² are frequently found in Calvin's writings. It is important to note the exact use of these concepts in the original Latin and French, in order to be clear on what he had in mind. In his opinion, it was by no means God's intention to trouble man with these. It is the result of the Fall of man through his own sin, leading to all kinds of anxiety and concern (*aliquid curae sustineant*) to keep us humble (*ut nos humiliaret*, CO 45:209).

Bouwsma (1988:184) summarises this in his biography of Calvin:

The worst adversity of the Christian is therefore not sin but doubt, of which anxiety is the immediate consequence. Doubt and anxiety are thus the most terrible adversities of every Christian, even the most faithful.

2 For example, *doute*, *incertitude*, *inquiétude*, *incertus*, *dubium*, *cura*.

This kind of uncertainty being so deeply rooted in our hearts and our being inclined to it, we may even find it hard to convince ourselves of what we confess, namely that God is always to be trusted (*Inst.* 3.2.15).³ Calvin acknowledged and confessed it even for himself: Lord, you beat me, but it is enough for me that it is your hand (CO 21:44).⁴ The church should not only take care of those suffering by providing what they need and by encouraging them, but also pastorally guide them according to the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ and convince them that they may experience victory over uncertainty and doubt. Our own conviction is built on our faith that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is also our God and Father.

In the pastoral care for those afflicted, they should be encouraged to know and firmly believe this. God is our Father in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The eternal Son of God gives us the assurance (*et de nous tenir là fermes*) that He is our brother, and we have the same Father. This should assure us that there is no real cause for doubt and anxiety (*est-il question de plus estre en doute ni en branle?* CO 58:138).

6. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The extent of Calvin's sympathy with fellow men is evident in his sermons (particularly those on the book of Deuteronomy), his tracts and comprehensive correspondence and, in particular, in his commentaries on the Holy Scripture. Guidelines for dealing with various kinds of social and economic issues abound in his written legacy. It is no moot point that Calvin had far-reaching influence on the social and economic life not only in Geneva, but also on reformed churches worldwide (Singer 1992:227). To his mind, the short-term benefit for the individual should always be subservient to the long-term benefit for society.

The current global financial and economic crisis should undoubtedly be regarded as a moral crisis. The cause is embedded in short-term greed, avarice and ulterior motives for personal gain. The Dutch politician Balkenende regards this as the cause of individuals as well as financial institutions taking irresponsible risks in their appetite for owning and controlling increasingly more. There is but a small step from this moral approach to the current global financial and economic crisis. Financial

3 *Tam alte enim et radicatus haeret in cordibus nostris incredulitas, et ita ad eam sumus propensi, ut quod ore fatentur omnes, Deum esse fidelem, non absque arduo certamine quisquam sibi persuadeat* (CO 2:410).

4 *Seigneur, tu me piles, mais il me suffit que c'est ta main.*

institutions – and individuals – are running irresponsible risks caused by short-term greed and self-centred behaviour (Balkenende 2009).

Serious and even radical change in the European socio-economic sphere characterised the 15th and 16th centuries. The premises of the Renaissance were that the individual should gain as many earthly possessions as possible, in order to attain full development and find complete joy in life (Potgieter 2009). For Calvin, to engage in economic practices was to subject oneself to the temptation to exploit or oppress one's fellow man; he perceived that "business people are in a very immediate and personal way at risk of forgetting truly Christian morals" (Biéler 2005:397). An even stronger stimulus was the rise of national governments that were now operating on cash rather than on a feudal-service basis (Reid 1984:76).

By the mid-16th century, a large number of refugees found their way to Geneva – including Calvin himself. It stands to reason that the city could in no way cope with providing ample housing and employment. This caused serious problems for the existing citizens.⁵ Consequently,

the exploitation that was threatening the economic survival of many poor refugees as well as natives in Geneva demanded his attention, as he believed that those in need must be provided with material means and possibilities for employment (McKee 2007:20).

Obviously, the number of Protestant refugees impacted on the economic activities of the city so that Calvin had to clarify his views in this regard. He did just that particularly in his sermons on the book of Deuteronomy.

Calvin's direct involvement in local matters of the city is a clear indication that he cared for much more than the spiritual well-being of the residents. He actively took part in the socio-economic events of Geneva. He not only practised what he preached, but also regarded it as his responsibility to make people aware of the practical consequences of their faith. He actively involved himself in the founding of a fire brigade, for citizens to be employed for cleaning the city's streets, and for officials patrolling it by night (Singer 1992:236). In addition, he was seriously concerned about the issue of unemployment and was an active member of a city council commission that had to consider whether a textile mill could be established in Geneva (Praamsma [s.a.]:133). His published views

5 Roughly 5000 refugees were registered between 1549 and 1560. Whereas, in 1536, Geneva had only approximately 50 merchants, three printers and no craft guilds, by the 1550s it had roughly 1500 immigrant artisans, including cobblers, goldsmiths, and textile workers, 180 merchants, 113 printers and booksellers (Douglas 1992:77).

on labour relations showed compassion for the poor, for instance in his commentary on Jeremiah 22:13 (CO 38:383).

Calvin realised the value and even the necessity of contracts in business deals (Comm. Gen. 29:14; 47:20). Biéler (1961) points out that, considering the perspective of modern economic science, current scientific research confirms Calvin's views on trade – particularly those regarding moral and spiritual aspects.⁶

7. INEQUALITY – ABUNDANCE AND POVERTY

Calvin admitted that, within God's providence, there is variety and indeed room for inequality with regard to earthly means, wealth and potential among people. Those who possess more should, however, realise that they have a grave responsibility to care for those who are in need. In his Commentary on 2 Corinthians, he grants that it is not unlawful (*nihilò nitidius fas*, CO 50:102) for the wealthy to live in greater panache than the poor, but at the same time to take care that all people have food.

The Lord ... has enjoined upon us frugality and temperance, and has forbidden, that any should go to excess, taking advantage of his abundance. Let those, then, that have riches, whether they have benefitted by inheritance, or procured it by industry and efforts, consider that their abundance was not intended to be laid out in intemperance or excess, but in relieving the necessities of the brethren (CO 50:102; Comm. 2 Cor. 8:15).

Yet, there is no reason why all men should lead a luxurious life: the labourer does enjoy his pork and beef, his cheese and sour milk, his onions and cabbage as much as the wealthy enjoy their copious meals (Comm. Num. 11:5). Employers owe their employees humanity, grace and care as is needed at that point in time (*praesenti necessitati consulendum*, CO 50:101).

Calvin wrote in no uncertain terms about extravagance under the cloak of Christian freedom:

When the means are supplied to roll and wallow in luxury, to intoxicate the mind and soul with present and be always hunting after new pleasures, is very far from a legitimate use of the gifts of

6 *Considérée du point de vue de la science économique moderne, la doctrine de Calvin sur le commerce, qui s'attache à l'aspect moral et spirituel de cette activité, apporte quelques confirmations à ce qui a été décrit scientifiquement par la suite* (Bieler 1961:453).

God. Let them, therefore, suppress immoderate desire, immoderate profusion, vanity, and arrogance, that they may use the gifts of God purely with a pure conscience (*Inst.* 3.19.9; CO 2:618).

In Book Four of his *Institutes*, Calvin deals with the means whereby the Church should take care of those who are in need. To the deacons belonged the care of the poor and the dispensing of alms (*Inst.* 4.4.1). He, however, distinguishes between two distinct classes of this office (Rom. 12:8). In the former, he designates deacons, who administered alms; in the latter, those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick.

For although the term has a more extensive meaning, Scripture specially gives the name of deacons to those whom the Church appoints to dispense alms, and take care of the poor, constituting them as it were stewards of the public treasury of the poor (*Inst.* 4.3.9).

Even so, Calvin was not in favour of giving to all in an irresponsible way: it had to be done with sound deliberation. In making grants, human untrustworthiness must always be borne in mind. In his Commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, Calvin states that the sages define virtue as the mean that lies, to quote Cicero, "between too much and too little", and that one must guard against clemency, lapsed into excess, from being ascribed to vice rather than to virtue. One must grant pardon, but not to all men. Some persons are improved by pardon, others are corrupted (Battles & Hugo 1969:43). He had a clear position on man's duty to diligent work as an inescapable responsibility. In his commentary on Genesis 2:15, he states that the earth was given to mankind under the clear condition to cultivate it (CO 23:44). God does not want us to be idle or lazy living in his world. He gave us hands and feet to be able to work (CO 26:296; Bouwsma 1988:199). Furthermore, let him who owns land, utilise it year by year in such a way that he does no harm to it through negligence; let him rather endeavour to pass it on to the next generation as it was given to him, or even cultivated to a better condition (CO 23:44; Comm. Gen. 2:15).

Equity was the fundamental criterion for formulating laws and regulations to regulate the new capitalist economy in Calvin's Geneva (Brouwer 2009:7). Thieves are not only those who clandestinely steal from other people, but also those who enrich themselves to the detriment of others, who prefer profit rather than equity (Comm. Exod. 20:15; CO 24:669), and who occupy someone else's land (CO 24:676; Comm. Deut. 19:14) – quite appropriate for the 21st century.

Calvin had no objection to the idea of peoples' right of possession. He states quite clearly that every person has the right to own what he

possesses. Yet, those who have abundance should give to the poor. The poor, however, should have patience: they do not have the right to rob the wealthy.⁷ God has distributed everything of this world according to His decision, and even the most wealthy of all people – bad they may be – may not be embezzled of their possessions by those in need (CO 23:199). The maintenance of a well-behaved community necessitates that all may possess their own (*ut quisque quod suum est possideat*, CO 24:171). Schulze (1992:223) correctly interprets Calvin, stating that he regarded possession as part of divine providence and as indispensable for an orderly community. Property may be obtained by purchase or by inheritance, and everyone has the right to augment his/her possessions by diligence or whatever virtuous means (CO 26:626⁸). Good governance implies for all the privilege to enjoy whatever belongs to them (*denique politicus ordo flagitat, a quoque teneri quod suum est*, CO 24:171; Comm. Ex. 16:17).

In Calvin's Geneva, the hospital would regularly have been charged with the city's poor. It would be expected to take care of the sick in the hospital, and deal with both out- and inpatients, including orphans. In addition to these ministrations, the hospital had a bread-baking ministry in which bread cooked in the hospital ovens was distributed weekly to the poor at their homes (Olson 1989:164).

Calvin was consistent regarding the moral aspects of economic life: to ignore this would be detrimental to human society. As his guidelines and principles in this regard were founded on the revealed will of God, as portrayed in His unquestionable Word, it remains relevant for 21st-century economic thought and particularly for those crises which the human race repeatedly causes for itself through its own unwarranted and even unjustified behaviour.

8. OTHER RELIGIONS

There is no doubt that one of the most serious current social challenges is the relationship between Christianity and other religions. The development of clear guidelines on the intrinsic value of various religions as means to know God – particularly in multicultural societies – has become a matter of serious consideration. A well-founded “theology of religions” may

7 *Cependant il faut que les povres soyent patiens, qu'ils s'abstiennent de toute malice, de toute rapine, de tout pillage* (CO 28:200).

8 *Nous voyons, quand Dieu laisse couler l'ordre de nature, que celui qui est riche, n'estimera pas que le bien luy soit venu du ciel, ne que Dieu y ait mis la main: mais il dira que le tout luy est venu d'heritage, et de succession, ou qu'il l'a acquesté par son industrie* (CO 26:626).

indeed be helpful. The missiologist Du Preez (1983:129) regards it as a vital necessity as a consequence of deeper knowledge of, and respect for non-Christian religions in the western world; the admission that religious pluralism is a reality; a negative notion of third-world peoples with regard to Christianity; the obvious decline of Christianity in Europe; a new interest in mysticism among the youth, and the issue of whether the Church should continue its traditional way of mission work among people of other religions. Introspection as to other religions has indeed become a moot point on the agenda of theological thought. Calvin's views in this regard may be valuable and directive (Potgieter 2008).

It is remarkable that there are only a few references to non-Christian religions in Calvin's writings. In his exposition of John 1:5, he writes:

The *light* which still dwells in corrupt nature consists chiefly of two parts; for, first, all men naturally possess some seed of religion; and, secondly, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences. But what are the fruits that ultimately spring from it, except that religion degenerates into a thousand monsters of superstition, and conscience perverts every decision, so as to confound vice with virtue? In short, natural reason never will direct men to Christ; and as to their being endued with prudence for regulating their lives, or born to cultivate the liberal arts and sciences, all this passes away without yielding any advantage (Comm. John 1:5).

The manifestation of the glory of God in creation (*semen religionis*) is sufficient, but, on account of man's deprivation, it does not lead to true knowledge of God. The implication is clear: people may realise that there is a Divine Being; yet, "on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient" to come to true knowledge of God (Comm. Rom. 1:20).

People may deem it adequate that they have some kind of zeal for religion, how preposterous it may be, not observing that true religion must conform to the will of God as its unerring standard (*Inst.* 1.4.3)

Calvin's approach to Judaism may occasionally create an impression of radical rejection and even a total lack of sympathy. There is, however, sufficient proof of a moderate approach, particularly in his Commentaries on Scripture.⁹ Even though Calvin leaves no doubt as to the serious consequences of a rejection of Christ, there will always remain the gateway to redemption by faith in Christ as Redeemer (Visser 1963; Locher 1967).

9 See also *Inst.* 4.16.14 and Calvin's Commentary on Romans 9-11.

Apart from idolatry and Judaism, the only other non-Christian religion directly referred to by Calvin is that of the Turks and Saracens – Islam. He states quite clearly that this is not an alternative way to true knowledge of the one and only God. Even these references are few and far between. We should, however, in any way possible, by exhortation, education, compassion and goodwill, and particularly through our prayers to God, endeavour to bring them into the community and unity of the Church through Christ alone (*Inst.* 1536, chapter II – *De fide*; Calvin 1980:154).

In all of his writings, Calvin (1988:709) left no doubt that there can be no true knowledge of God unless it is through Christ. The redemption and forgiveness of sin that He earned for us on Calvary remains available for all mankind (Comm. 1 Tim. 2:5).

It suffices to conclude that Calvin had a clear view on the social challenges of his era, and that his perspectives on these provide more than enough to consider in the 21st century.

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